The Guard

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The Guard

by TigerPrawn

Summary

When Michael Kohlhaas laid down his arms to await his fate, he had not expected that fate to include finding a love he had never known before.

Robert Devereux escaped his fate and has been hiding his identity for his own safety. He had not expected to meet someone that would make him want to reveal everything - even if it meant a risk to his own life.

Notes

For the lovely VenerandeGarden
She wanted: a fic Inspired by the deleted wood chopping scene, but for the guard watching over Kohlhaas in that scene to be Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex in disguise.

Please suspend your belief and historical knowledge - I have fudged the dates in order to make these two completely contemporary.

See the end of the work for more notes

In truth, there was no need to chop the wood. It had lain this way for a year whilst he had been at war. The wood was weathered and unlikely to burn well. He just wanted to have an axe in his hand and bring it down over and over - working his muscles to the point of pain to try and blank his mind for a short while.

Robert sat watching him. Guarding him, protecting him - and that didn't help the turmoil in his mind.

The Princess had left the two men - Robert and Armand - as guards and protectors for him and his daughter, Lisbeth, when he had given himself up. They were to stay with him until his trial to ensure his safety until his fate was decided. He had waged war for what had begun to feel like a lifetime - trying hard to keep a grip of what had driven him to it. The dispute with the Baron, the lawsuit over his horses and the abuses of the lord's powers. He wasn't sure he had ever meant to get so far, but in fact he wasn't the only one who had wanted to rally against the tyrannical behaviour of the nobility. Others had joined his cause as one they felt moved to do so because of their own plight.

But Michael had Lisbeth to worry about. Her mother had already died for this cause and now the amnesty he had been granted had been withdrawn by the Princess through no fault of his own. An agitator, a man who was once his servant, and who he was truly no longer responsible for had caused trouble enough to negate the previous kindness of the Princess.

He wanted to channel his anger into the axe he was holding. Into the wood and down into the very earth. His anger bubbled under the surface, as was his way - and even now trying to express it more deeply, something held him back. He had been planning to go into the market and sell his horses, Robert telling him to wait for more guards - he had even joked to Robert that the man worried for his safety more than a guard should. It had left a strange feeling within him that truth often did when it was unsettling.

When Armand had come with word of the voiding of the amnesty, Michael had frozen. He had been sat up on his carriage, about to set up for market with Lisbeth. Robert stood at his side and he had to ask -

"Does that make me your prisoner?" The words hung heavy in the air between them then. Robert hadn't answered and Michael could not look at him.

And now he chopped wood - bringing the axe down with all the anger he could muster.

"I would have done the same as you." Robert spoke up from where he sat behind Michael, his French accent almost good enough to hide his English origins.

As always when Robert spoke, the hairs on the back of Michael's neck stood on end. They had been in each other's company for weeks now and had fallen easily into regular conversations about so many aspects of life. From the mundane to the philosophical. And more so into unexpectedly deep conversations about their pasts. Although Robert seemed

vague on some matters of his past, Michael couldn't deny that even in those short weeks it felt that Robert perhaps knew him better than even his wife had. A painful realisation.

Judith had been beautiful, loving, brave and kind. She had been so in love with him that he couldn't help but be in love with her. Even so, he knew that life with her would not have been so easy had they not spent long months of the year apart whilst he was away trading.

Robert's presence seemed to highlight that to him, and that only added to the anger he he felt. She had died for his cause, for him. He had no right to ever disrespect her memory by thinking these things - by confronting the emotions that Robert's presence had forced him to.

His anger rose and Michael found himself asking gruffly - "What are you talking about?"

"The war. I would have done the same as you."

Michael froze for a moment. They had talked enough that he knew Robert had sensed his anger and was simply trying to support him. But the very act of that felt like a disgrace to his wife. Robert was young, what did he know of love or war?

"What do you know?" Michael snapped.

He studied Robert then, his anger burning deeper as Robert looked somewhat hurt, and shrugged. When he tried to explain further he only made it worse -

"If they'd done to me what was done to you…"

It was too much. Altogether too much to have those words from Robert's mouth at this time, now that he had no amnesty and his child to consider. A child who was motherless because of his cause.

"All the time that war went on I only wanted one thing. To go home. To go back to my work, my wife, my children, my horses. You are my guard, I am your prisoner. You talk to me of war? Don't you know we want to live in peace?

The look of hurt in Robert's face was almost unbearable, but he trampled down the feelings this stirred by staying angry.

Robert stood and walked away, leaving Michael to mutter - "You don't know anything."

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The conversation with Robert sat heavy with Michael and soured in his gut. The amnesty was gone and his death was certain. His actions would leave Lisbeth an orphan regardless of any rulings in his favour. If he won out against the Baron then a payment would be due and it would allow her fiscal security, for what that was worth.

When he had lain down his arms he had accepted that death was a possibility. He had made his peace with it on almost every level… Until the Princess had left Robert and Armand.

Robert had sought him out in those first few days, making sure he and Lisbeth had everything they needed and were comfortable. It was a strange courtesy that Michael had quickly realised was more than sympathy or empathy. A fancy perhaps? And one that he did not discourage.

They had grown close in a few short weeks - conversations that Michael had never had before. Interest and questions even Judith had never asked of him. She seemed to have loved him with awe, as though he was something precious that she could never really quite have. That had never felt clearer to him than in the quiet moments, late nights by the fire and days working his horses, that Robert spent at his side.

Michael sighed, feeling a pain through him as the realisation struck.

It didn't matter. Now that the amnesty was gone, he needed to take Lisbeth and go - keep her safe. He wasn't sure that was something he could do if he remained near Robert - distracted.

"Michael." His name spoken softly over the sound of the crackle of the fire, roused him from his thoughts as he sat before the hearth. Robert's voice always had that light touch - it sounded like a gentle caress no matter what was said.

Michael looked up, Robert's features lit by the warm glow of the fire. He looked angelic. Michael was awed, perhaps in the same way Judith had been of him - and that pained him.

"I'm sorry if I offended you, it wasn't my intention." Robert tripped over the words a little as he sought to voice in French something he had been clearly rehearsing in his head in his native tongue.

Michael let out a long sigh. "Some things are hard to hear, and harder to know."

They were both silent for a moment before Robert moved closer to him and then took a knee at Michael's feet. A hand was on the armrest of the chair, and then the other fell lightly on Michael's knee.

"Please believe me that I… I have come to enjoy your company better than anyone else I have ever known. You are a good man, you do not play games or use those around you. I my past I have been used ill and used others in return, stepped beyond the bounds of what was right. I hated who I became and I…"

Robert shook his head and Michael found his heart aching for him, for his confessions. Perhaps it was that ache that stopped him from drawing back when Robert suddenly pressed himself upwards and his lips fell lightly upon Michael's.

The kiss was chaste and light for the first few moments. But when he gave no resistance, it seemed Robert took it as an invitation - moving up Michael until he was straddling his lap and kissing him deeply.

Nothing had ever felt so good or so right and Michael hated himself and the situation all the more for it. Even so, he began kissing Robert back - exploring his mouth, allowing the gentle

slide of their tongues. His heart thundered and stuttered in turn at the hardness he felt pressing against him.

He shuddered and pushed Robert back.

“Wait… I can’t… This is…” He couldn't find the words. He didn’t know what they should be.

“I’m… I’m sorry.” Robert looked mortified and moved back so quickly he almost fell to the floor. He stumbled and shook his head, muttering further apologies as he fled the room.

Every nerve within Michael was pulled tight and he wanted to go after him. It took every little bit of restraint within him not to follow Robert and kiss him again. Not to run his hands over the lithe and boyish body, not to take Robert's hardness into his hand and feel what another man felt like in that way.

Instead he fastened his resolve tighter. This distraction would make an already impossible situation so much worse.

It was time to wake Lisbeth and leave. Run.

*

For a brief moment they had been free. The two of them in the wilderness, windswept and removed from the life that had been. For a brief moment.

And then they had been captured.

Michael looked out of the cell window, freedom was no longer to be his. For Lisbeth’s sake he had to accept his fate now.

The room was the last he would see, the few comforts here the last he would have. He feared death as any sane man might, but he had made his peace with it. Lisbeth would be alone and would hate him as much as she grieved him, and there was nothing he could do about that.

The voice behind him startled him, rousing him from his thoughts.

“I needed to see you.” Robert’s tone was full of longing that made Michael ache - all the more so when he turned and saw it etched deep into his face.

He’d had a few visitors, including the young preacher who had befriended him, helping him settle his affairs. But he had expected no one further. Certainly not a guard left to watch over him.

“How did you come to be here?” Michael asked, trying to ignore his own longing. Part of him wished to throw modesty aside so that he could know this feeling, know this man, before he died. But it would do no good, it would only cause more pain.

The Princess had interceded - amended his sentence. He wouldn’t be torn apart, skinned alive, or burned. He would be beheaded - clean and quick. And each day until then took him

closer to Judith and farther from Lisbeth. An agony in every way. And the man that stood before him now was a reminder of that.

He didn't dare do anything to dishonour himself and remove the small favour of the Princess. For Lisbeth's sake he didn't want her to know he died in that way.

"I am a friend of the Princess, of her court." Robert said, the words in that same gentle tone as always.

Michael frowned at him, trying to understand his meaning, and hating that his first thought was of Robert in the Princess's bed. It sent an anger through him he had no right to.

Perhaps he could see that internal turmoil play across Michael's features, because Robert stepped forward, holding up a placating hand.

"Michael… There is something I should have told you before."

Michael frowned, wondering at such a strange situation he had found himself in on the eve of his execution. He looked at Robert for a long moment then and noticed the changes in him since their last meeting, not so many days ago.

His hair was better kempt, freshly washed with sweetly scented soap that had brought out the curls in excess. He looked more angelic for it - damnably so. His clothes were the most remarkable difference. Gone were the humble coverings of little more than a servant, replaced by fine brocade and rich cloth - fashioned more as the English wore than the French. How well and naturally he wore them, was captivating - as though he had be born to such finery as befitting his beauty.

"Why are you-" Before Michael could even work out what word should come next, another figure came through the opened cell door. The Princess stepped slowly and carefully, surveying her surroundings. The Governor came in behind her and guards stood at the door.

Robert looked pained, as though he hadn't expected her, or at least not so soon. He clearly had something he had wanted to say without her present. The whole situation was completely irregular and it sent a tremor of fear through Michael. Would they execute him now? Not give him this final night and a chance on the morrow to say goodbye to his daughter?

The Princes swept passed Robert, who bowed in deference - expertly and practiced. She stood between Michael and the others, looking over him coolly - as though she were trying to calculate his value.

The Governor, a man he might call a friend more than an acquaintance, stepped forward when the Princess glanced briefly back at him.

He cleared his throat and seemed a little nervous before addressing Michael, perhaps due to the presence of the Princess herself.

"In the name of Marguerite, Princess of Angoulême, Queen of Navarre, sister of the King, today I dispense the justice that you have demanded. You will have returned to you what was

forcibly taken - your horses."

Michael gave a curt nod, expecting as much from their agreement but glad to know this action was being taken nonetheless.

"This is reparation for your servant, and reparation for yourself."

Michael frowned when the Governor handed him two pouches of coins, as though he could make use of any money in this place. He was about to request the money be given to the Preacher to settle upon Lisbeth, but the Governor continued.

"The Baron has already been taken into custody. He will receive two years in prison for what he did to you... You have what you wanted."

The words were not cruel, sympathetic if anything, but then the Governor hesitated before swallowing and continuing.

"Michael Kohlhaas now that your rights have been restored, make yourself ready, for having breached the peace, to restore the rights of His Majesty the King, in the presence of his legal representative-"

"Stop." The Princess held up her hand and the Governor looked back at her and inclined his head, before stepping back. His expression was relieved and Michael was all the more bewildered by the situation unfolding before him.

He looked to Robert who seemed nervous, his eyes downcast.

"Michael Kohlhaas, my brother and I are satisfied that the time you have served and the losses you have suffered restore the rights you injured. The Earl of Essex has spoken well in your favour and this has all been settled." She clapped her hands lightly, that delicate but cold way she had. Two of her honour guard stepped forward and for a moment Michael stiffened - was he to be taken to the executioner? This might all be a delusion.

"Guards, return monsieur Kohlhaas to his property. Governor, ensure that his horses are reunited with him there as has been promised."

All around bowed their heads in acknowledgement of her orders, Michael copying the motion as she turned from him and started from the room. He wanted to question what was happening, but had no desire to invite the annoyance of the Princess now that he seemed so close to freedom.

Instead he looked up to Robert, trying to find his eyes, but the man resolutely continued to look away, with no explanation of his presence.

At the door the Princess turned and looked over to Robert herself. "Come with me Essex, we still have much to discuss that I know my brother will want to hear shortly."

Michael's brow knit together and his mind reeled. He had not really taken in all of the words the Princess had said, seeming nonsensical as he knew no Earl. And now Robert's eyes met his in a sort of apology before he too bowed low and then swept out after the Princess.

“Michael, let us return you to Lisbeth.” The Governor said kindly, clearly reading his stunned expression.

His questions were many, but he knew answers might be scarce, he needed to focus on one thing only - he was not to be executed, he would see his daughter again.

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It was strange for Michael to think that only a few weeks earlier he had been close to execution. Life had settled so quickly back into its natural rhythm. Seeing to the horses, teaching Lisbeth how to mind them. One day he might teach her all he knew so that they could continue to work together.

When Judith was alive he’d be gone for months on end. He had missed a great deal of Lisbeth’s childhood as a result. This wasn’t uncommon for many men, but now she had no one but him and that meant a change to how they could live. He was lucky with her, she was brave. Fiercely so.

The wind was picking up now, the cooler weather was coming - blowing a gale across his property. In the darkness there was a further chill that he found refreshing. The wind tugged at his hair, obscuring his view from the top steps oh his house. He could hear and feel the horses in the paddock, much more than see them. And whilst he surveyed the scene, unwinding from the busy day, something was out of place.

It took a moment for him to focus in on that thing that seemed wrong.

There was a rhythmic hoofbeat that couldn’t be one of his animals. Someone was approaching his home in the dark of the night, and that didn’t sit well for him. A small amount of him was terrified that his fate had been changed.

Since returning to his home, he’d heard no more from the Princess and her authorities. He had seen the Governor at market as though nothing had happened in those many months. He had otherwise be left in peace to resume his life, hopeful that there would be no reason for his freedom to be taken, or his life.

The circumstances of his redemptions still eluded him, the Governor not able or willing to shed further light when gently pressed. The most he knew was what the Princess had said - that Michael Kohlhaas stood a free and living man on the good grace of her Majesty, and the word of a British Earl.

It still baffled Michael, because the explanation for this seemed too strange to be real. After all, there was only one Englishman he knew.

He considered going into the house and waking Lisbeth, ready in case this was another arrest or worse. Michael’s hand felt empty - no sword or bow since the amnesty. Closing the door softly behind him, Michael went down to the stables to find a pitch fork he used for mucking out.

One of the new horses, stabled whilst she settled, whinnied at him as he took up the pitchfork and went back to the door, standing there as he tried to see in the moonlight.

A hooded figure on a horse galloped onto the property and slowed their mount to a trot, pulling it up at the front of the house. As he dismounted, Michael stole forward quickly and silently until he was within grasp.

“What is your business?” Michael raised his voice, holding the pitchfork. The figure raised his hands and turned slowly so that they were fully face to face before he lowered his hands enough to pull away his hood.

“Robert?”

Robert Devereux, his once guard, stood before him dressed in the finest of clothes holding the reigns of a thoroughbred Michael had no doubt the quality or expense of.

“The Earl of Essex.” Michael finally voiced his suspicion aloud.

Robert inclined his head, his expression contrite. “I was, and apparently once more find myself the Earl of Essex.”

He looked nervous and at first Michael was unsure how to react.

After a few silent moments, Michael took to his knee in a way he never had before the Baron, or even before the Princess. He bowed his head in deference.

“My lord, I owe you my life.” Michael acknowledged with no little feeling. “How do I ever repay that debt?”

“Please Michael, don’t…” Robert said softly, placing a hand on Michael’s shoulder. His name felt so tender on Robert’s lips. He shuddered at the familiar touch.

“What did you do to win royal favour?” Michael asked. He needed to know, though he was not remotely prepared for the pain he knew the answer might bring.

Robert dropped to his knees, placing a finger under Michael’s chin to tilt his head so they could speak eye to eye.

“I sold her the secrets of my Queen. She… used me ill and I behaved badly, and perhaps she doesn’t deserve such a betrayal… But it was all I had to offer. Besides my own life… and I would have offered that as well.”

Michael felt a dull ache at the relief of knowing he had not been intimate with the Princess, he was not sure he could bear that. It was the relief as much as Robert’s words and actions, that drove him forward. He pressed his lips to Robert’s as Robert had once done to him. They remained kneeling on the cold ground, wind tugging lightly at their hair and clothes, as they explored each other. The kiss was so gentle, soft and tender.

It was everything Michael had tried not to want. Everything he knew he shouldn’t want. He thought of Judith and pulled back, cupping Robert’s face in his hands and studying him.

Judith had loved him so very much, he knew. He could have drowned in her love - it was a sort of awe given unconditionally because she had loved his beauty. And he had loved her in his own way and very deeply, but it wasn't the same. And it wasn't this. It wasn't this connection and he wanted to feel guilty about that but after everything, after the last year of fighting and awaiting death he just didn't have it in him.

"Why would you do that for me?" He asked softly.

Robert smirked, and it was a glorious thing. "Because you are a good man, who I have grown to care for more than anyone that I have known before." Robert lowered his eyes and chortled when he continued - "even more than myself."

Michael shook his head and chuckled. He leaned forward and kissed Robert again, until they were grasping at each other, clothes ruffled as they pulled each other close.

Robert broke the kiss, panting. "Please… I have wanted you since the first moment we talked, please…"

The words struck Michael and he felt them deeply. The difference between Robert wanting him from their first dialogue, and Judith wanting him from her first sight of him - before she knew anything of his person or character. But Robert knew him and wanted him. And he wanted Robert so desperately.

He clambered up, pulling Robert with him until they both stood in a partial embrace.

"The stables." Michael muttered against Robert's lips. "I don't want to wake-"

Robert was already nodding and pulling him towards the open door of the stables.

*

In the darkness Michael had guided Robert to the ladder up to the rafters. They had climbed together, Robert close behind him, crowding him in a way that made his blood thrum. At the top they stumbled away from the edge and towards the pile of clean blankets stored there for the horse when winter finally arrived.

They were roughly hewn but would be more comfortable than the cold wood or the sharp straw. Though, in that moment, Michael didn't much care. The way Robert pushed him down made clear that the Earl of Essex didn't care either.

Michael went gladly, falling onto his back on the pile, Robert climbing over him quickly and straddling his groin. It was immediately clear that they were as mutually aroused as the other, and it brought a light hearted laughter from him that he hadn't felt in a long while. It made his heart feel full.

Robert swallowed the laughter as he claimed his mouth again, rutting against Michael in a way he had never before considered could be pleasurable.

They were both groaning when Robert sat back and started to unbutton and remove his elaborate tunic before starting on Michael's. Both bare chests were heaving as they surveyed

each other hungrily.

“I want you.” Michael growled the words without even knowing how his want could be achieved. He needed to feel Robert against him and needed them to take pleasure in each other in whatever way they could.

“Have you been with a man before?” Robert asked, breathlessly.

Michael shook his head and felt the colour rise in his cheeks.

“It requires…” he shook his head dismissively. “Time and… items I don’t… But there are…” Robert looked both thoughtful and desperate as he moved off of Michael and stood. He unfastened his trousers with hurried hands, shedding clothes until he stood completely naked before Michael - whose heart was thundering in his chest. The sight set his entire body alight in a way no woman ever had.

After being startled into inaction by the vision in front of him, Michael felt Robert’s hands start on his clothing. He lifted his hips to allow his trousers to be dragged from him - his heavy and leaking cock freed with a bounce. His jaw was clenching and every muscle straining as Robert crawled over him and began kissing him again. Slow, but hard and deep as he drew himself back and forth up Michael’s body. Their hard lengths caught between them and touching at times, as the Robert rolled their bodies together to create the friction they both needed.

The kiss grew hungry, desperate - and this was mirrored in their movements as Michael instinctively moved against Robert as a counter force.

Robert broke the kiss, gasping for breath - his expression one of agonised bliss as he cried out. Michael felt the pulsing of the cock pressed against him, as it throbbed and spilled - the warm wetness spreading between them with each shuddering movement until Robert stilled.

He shook his head, still trying to catch his breath. “I have been waiting so long for this…” It seemed almost as an apology.

Michael stroked a damp curl from Robert’s face. “That I bring you this pleasure thrills me in a way that I have never known.”

“I am too sensitive to move.” Robert chuckled. “But I want your pleasure too.”

Michael rolled them until they were on their sides, facing each other and able to kiss again. Gentle pecks and brushes of their lips together as the new position allowed them to separate enough for the reprieve of Robert’s spent cock.

“Let me have your thighs.” Michael rumbled the words and felt Robert shudder at them. This was something he had done before, when a potential pregnancy was considered and a less fertile option required. Not be a risk here of course, but gave a solution that had blood thundering in his ears and his cock straining.

Robert let out a shaky breath before moving fluidly - rolling and repositioning himself facing away from Michael. He pushed his ass to Michael's groin as he looked back over his shoulder - offering his mouth. Michael took it, kissing him hard as his hands went around Robert's smooth chest and pulled him back until their bodies were flush. His cock slotted neatly against Robert's ass, making him groan into his lover's mouth.

"Please…" Robert spoke the word as he turned away, breaking the kiss. He lifted his leg and reached between his thighs, taking hold of Michael's cock. The very touch of the man's hand on his appendage sent a jolt through him. He found himself instinctively moving to reposition himself in a way that allowed Robert to draw his cock between his thighs.

When Robert closed his thighs it felt like bliss. They were strong and muscular - the form of a man strengthened by riding astride horses. He had no idea how different this would feel with a man. He groaned without realising it and felt Robert flex his thighs.

"Oh… lord…" The words stammered from his lips and his hips snapped without thought. When Robert's hand reached behind him and grabbed at his ass cheek, Michael let out another moan and began to thrust.

It was exquisite.

He buried his face in the back of Michael's neck, breathing in his scent - clean hair and the sharpness of sweat. His hands splayed across the firm and toned chest as he buried himself over and over between Robert's thighs.

The tears that rolled down his cheeks were as unexpected as the perfect feeling of completion he felt - like he had not been whole until this moment and never realised it. He felt Robert shiver as the tears fell upon his skin.

"Michael…" His name was expelled on a gentle sigh. "Please, come for me…" it was not an order or request, but a sweet encouragement that Michael didn't need.

He clutched Robert ever tighter and drove between his thighs with increasing force until they were both gasping for breath.

"Robert…" The name fell from his lips in a sharp cry as he spilled between Robert's thighs. He thrust a few more times, slowing even as the mess he had made of the delicate flesh eased his way. His heart was light and his mind clear as he drew deep breaths - the air filled with the scent of straw, horseflesh, fine soap and copulation.

*

"I need to return to the house, Lisbeth will be concerned." Michael nuzzled against Robert's throat as he spoke.

They had slept well after their coupling and both woken with the sun.

Robert nodded. "I will be missed at the Princess's court."

The reminder that Robert would no longer live here with them was jarring.

“You will be missed here too.” He couldn’t help but say, enjoying the way Robert’s skin moved under his lips as he chuckled.

“I will be back, frequently. I am talking with your neighbour about buying his property. It seems this is the place for me to settle and I find myself delighted at the thought.” Robert pushed him back then, so that they could look upon each other. “I will make a place for us in that home, anytime you wish to be in it.”

Michael’s heart was full. To have found this and keep it, after everything that had happened was so surreal but welcome. More welcome that he might ever have imagined. He had never bowed down easily before others, and his pride and principles had lead him to a near terrible fate. But he found now he could easily bow to someone worthy of his subjection, and so answered in the only way he felt he could -

“I will always be at your command my lord.”

Robert’s responding grin brought heaven to earth.

End Notes

The entire sex scene was pretty much just framed around my desire to have Michael rumble the words "let me have your thighs". So... yeah. That happened.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!